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ABSTRACT

While some social constructionists are unprepared to confront the role of ethics in the process of communication, the fact must be faced that as a person constructs reality, he or she makes judgments about that reality. Here are four situational perceptions that affect how decisions are socially constructed as ethical or not ethical within decision-making communities, specifically, within faculty governance at Azusa Pacific University (California). These perceptions involve: (1) the degree to which reasonable choices have been laid out; (2) whether or not information has been presented fairly; (3) whether or not calls for a decision are based on "good reasons"; and (4) whether or not the message violates or enhances humanity. First, one way to help distinguish between persuasion and coercion is in the concept of "significant choice." For Thomas R. Nielsen, not only must the perception of choice be present, but that choice must appear to be reasonable to the hearer. Second, the ethical dilemma associated with the fair presentation of information focuses on whether there has been a search for all relevant information. Third, in attempting to make a decision, the subject must avoid circular reasoning; Walter R. Fisher presents five steps for evaluating different options in a decision. Fourth, some writers characterize ethical communication as that which enhances and promotes uniquely human characteristics and characterize unethical communication as that which dehumanizes its audience. The perspective of social constructionism runs the risk of being morally vapid, but it is not impossible to find transcendent values for particular forms of communication that can help toward the understanding of communication processes within them. (Contains 27 notes.) (TB)

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THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF ETHICS

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Over the past fifteen years, there has been a slow but steady shift in the way the field of communication studies and explains communication processes and practices. In the mid-1970's, when I was beginning my graduate work, there was a great push toward quantification: to measure attitudes toward communication and look for their relationship to behaviors, to determine how people felt after communicating, to see if the way they perceived situational dimensions affected the way in which they would communicate within that situation. Cushman and McPhee's work titled *Message-Attitude-Behavior Relationship,*[1] a book full of mathematical explanations of the way in which attitudes manifested themselves in communication behavior, was representative of this push toward quantification. Those immersed in the rhetorical tradition, using critical and historical methods to study communication, often made the accusation that quantitative researchers who desired to generate scientific, empirical models of communication were suffering from "physics envy."

There are still people within the field of communication who strive to describe and predict behavior by means of quantification, and these researchers have managed to produced a number "snapshots" of communication behaviors, explaining some of the variability in communication choices. It is unlikely that those who prefer to study communication in this way will simply give up their statistic models, and I find it equally unlikely that very many of their studies will result in much more than the confirmation of things we might have intuited earlier. Such researchers focus on the products of communication--what was the message, did it work, what outcomes did it generate, and so forth.

The last few years have seen a shift at the theoretical level, however, and a movement toward the generation of a different set of questions about communication behavior. Pearce characterizes this movement as "a continuing dialogue between two voices, one of which seeks to 'represent' reality and the other which recognizes that these representations themselves 'construct' reality."[2] The latter group of voices are known as "social construction"

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[1] Donald P. Cushman and Robert D. McPhee, *Message-Attitude-Behavior Relationship: Theory, Methodology, and Application* (New York: Academic Press, 1980).

[2] W. Barnett Pearce, "A 'Camper's Guide' to Constructionisms," *Human Systems: The Journal of Systemic*

theorists. While social construction theory has become an attractive way to describe communication processes, seeing "communication as a 'formative' process in which the world is created in patterns of social interaction,"[3] there is a fear that constructionism, because of its "immersion in continuous ambiguity, and the endless sea of tolerance"[4] that it invites, may be morally and ideologically empty. While Gergen would argue that in rejecting a hegemonic view of moral order, social constructionism may "yield greater fruits for humankind than one that is morally committed,"[5] I am not sanguine about such an outcome. This paper is an attempt to find some transcendent moral values that can serve as focus points for a discussion of ethics when one studies communication from the viewpoint of a social constructionist. In doing so, I will briefly outline social construction theory, and then identify four ethical questions we might ask about communication practices when studied from a social construction viewpoint.

THE PRACTICE OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM

To study communication from a social constructionist standpoint is to understand that "we live *in* communication."[6] That is, we don't communicate about reality, but our talking about the world around us allows us to create our understanding of it as real. While the social constructionist would not argue that talking about something makes it exist (that is, I cannot say "chair" and make one appear), such a person would argue that to name something is to have some knowledge about it, and the refusal to name something is a way of denying its reality. As Pearce puts it:

> . . . "we" consist of a cluster of social conversations, and . . .these patterns of communication constitute the world as we know it. In this view, communication is a primary social process, the material substance of those things whose reality

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Consultation and Management 3 (1992), p.139.

[3] Ibid., p. 140.

[4] Kenneth Gergen, "Social Construction in Question," *Human Systems: The Journal of Systemic Consultation and Management* 3 (1992), p. 163.

[5] Ibid., p. 181.

[6] W. Barnett Pearce, *Communication and the Human Condition* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois Press, 1989), p. xvii.

we often take for granted, such as our "selves," motives, relationships, what we would otherwise describe as "facts," and so forth. The forms of communication in which we participate either liberate or enslave us; they facilitate or subvert human values. The characteristics of the moral universe and the properties of mind are sufficiently different that any number of stories may be told that "adequately" account for the facts.[7]

Examples of "naming" that allow concepts to exist include instances of discrimination, sexual harassment, and responses to the Holocaust. At one time, it seemed perfectly acceptable to some people that African Americans would be denied service at restaurants, a place to sit on a bus, or access to medical care simply because of their color. We see that now as discrimination, and having named it as a negative thing, do our best not to allow it to happen again. Twenty years ago, sexual harassment was unnamed; those of us who experienced it were expected to put up with it or leave the situation. Today, having named it as an undesirable practice, we can ask that the action be terminated or that the offender be sanctioned in some way.

The Holocaust is a prime example of the social construction of reality. There are those who would deny that it ever took place "in fact," and they devote a great deal of energy to debunking the "myths" of the extermination of 6 million Jews during World War II. But the story continues to be told by survivors of the camps, by those who liberated the camps, and by those such as Steven Spielberg, who has created an enduring story in *Schindler's List*. When he accepted his Oscars for Best Director and Best Picture, Spielberg implored educators not to let the story die, and asked them to call on the 350,000 survivors of the Holocaust that can help to continue the story. Most compelling, though, was the acceptance speech of one of his co-producers, who gave his name and said, "My number was A7233. I was at Auschwitz. Those who went to their death told me not to forget, to tell others what happened to them."

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[7]Ibid., p. 11. He continues, "I put 'adequately' in quotation marks to indicate that the criterion to be met, just as the story designed to meet it, is socially constructed.

The Holocaust has been named, it has become real to us in ways it was not real to those who lived through World War II and never had an idea that such atrocities were taking place. There are others whose story has not been told, whose deaths have been unmarked: they have died in Turkey, in Afghanistan, in Bosnia, in Somalia, in South Africa, in Cambodia. And their deaths will continue to seem distant and unreal to us until someone can tell their story in a compelling way, so that it takes on a life of its own.

The examples I have used are all negative. The first two are instances where something has been named unacceptable, the last has been called an atrocity. We can just as easily make judgments about the way the people *should* act, and what the most pleasing behavior is. But to make a judgment about the acceptability of a practice or an event is to change the way we see it, as Black points out:

> Moral judgments, however balanced, however elaborately qualified, are nonetheless categorical. Once rendered, they shape decisively one's relationship to the object judged. They compel, as forcefully as the mind can be compelled, a manner of apprehending an object. Moral judgments coerce one's perceptions of things.[8]

Herein lies the dilemma. As we construct reality we make judgments about it. But to take a social constructionist point of view is to reject the positioning of some values over others. Gergen notes:

> Yet while a constructionist posture invites moral deliberation, it does not champion one set of moral suppositions over another. . . .It is important to ask whether a theory of knowledge that establishes hierarchy of values. . .is desirable. . . .For there is no single value, moral ideal, or social good that when fully pursued, will not trammel upon the alternatives and obliterate the social patterns which these alternatives support. Pursue justice to its limits, and mercy is lost; favor honesty above all, and personal security is threatened; champion

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[8] Edwin Black, "The Second Persona," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 56 (1970): 109-119.

community well-being and individual initiative may be destroyed.[9]

Gergen is right: the extreme pursuit of any value may eliminate viable alternatives. Yet the adoption of a social constructionist position invites us into discourse. Within the social constructionist viewpoint we focus on the "forms" of the discourse activities in which we are involved. And it is difficult, even when we purposely avoid setting some values up as more important or compelling than others, to enter into a social constructionist view without adopting some forms of communication as better suited for understanding the world around us.

Pearce argues that dialogue, as opposed to monologue, more effectively promotes a social constructionist view of the world. One reason is that "in monologue, questions are asked to gain a speaking turn or to make a point; in dialogue, questions are asked to invite an answer. In monologue, one speaks in order to impress or impact on others; in dialogue, one speaks in order to take a turn at an interpersonal process that affects all participants."[10] There are three characteristics that differentiate monologic speakers from dialogic speakers:

(1) Those who engage in monologue think of action in terms of the effect it may have on other people; those who engage in dialogue think of action in terms of the effect it may have on themselves.

(2) Those who engage in monologue can only create action when values are already in place; those who engage in dialogue find that determining what the values are is the primary purpose of interaction.

(3) Those who engage in monologue assume that there are objective facts that may somehow be determined; those who engage in dialogue realize that their perspective and the actions they take may determine what the facts are at a particular time in a particular matter.

By engaging in dialogue, we can hear multiple stories and come to understand how

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[9] Gergen, op cit., p. 180

[10] W. Barnett Pearce, "Achieving Dialogue with the 'Other' in a Postmodern World," in Philip Gaunt (Ed.), *Beyond Agendas: New Directions in Communication Research* (Wesport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993), p. 61.

those stories both liberate and oppress us. We can understand the need for people to tell their own stories rather than having it told for them, to name themselves rather than be named by others. We can understand that what seems to be "fact" for us is indeed only a supposition or assumption to another person.

Understanding how people name their reality also allows us to understand how they come to make ethical decisions. To name something, to describe it, is to give it some value and to ask others to see it similarly. Rather than consider how ethical decisions are based on a solid hierarchy of clearly defined values known in advance to decision-makers, a social constructionist approach examines how values guide choices and how choices define values. Social constructionism recognizes the reflexivity between values and actions.

I do not propose a complete identification of the dimensions of ethical decisions from a social constructionist point of view. Rather, I will identify four situational perceptions that affect how decisions are socially constructed as ethical or not ethical within decision-making communities, specifically, within faculty governance at APU. These perceptions involve (1) the degree to which reasonable choices have been laid out; (2) whether or not information has been presented fairly; (3) whether or not calls for a decision are based on "good reasons"; and (4) whether or not the message violates or enhances our humanity.[11]

DO THOSE ADVOCATING THE POSITION CREATE A PERCEPTION OF CHOICE?

Understanding the degree to which reasonable choices have been presented requires that we first recognize that decision-making is a process of responding to various persuasive arguments and selecting the best alternative. When people are attempting to get others to see things their way, they may opt to make the choices seem wide or narrow. When the array of choices seems narrow, there generally is a feeling on the part of the group that the situation seems coercive. The primary characteristic that separates persuasion from coercion is the *group's* perception that they have a choice in responding. People frequently recite a line

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[11] Within my discussion, I have assumed that those presenting and responding to arguments are also those who make the decisions. I have tried, therefore, to refer to the decision-making body as a whole whenever possible.

from The Godfather: "I made him an offer he couldn't refuse." In that case, the reference was to a coercive act; the recipient couldn't refuse because he felt his life was threatened if he did.

Determining whether a decision-making process offers those involved a true choice is often difficult. Gearhart maintains that any intent to change another is an act of violence, a reduction of their choices, and we are even more unethical when we try to convince the other that the choices we lay out are the best.[12]

One way to help distinguish between persuasion and coercion is in the concept of *significant choice*. Nielsen argues that within the American political system we value the worth of the individual, reason and rationality, self-determination, and the realization of a person's potential. Ethical communication is that which allows us the freedom of choice to be ourselves, realize our potential, and determine our own fate.[13] For Nielsen, then, not only must the perception of choice be present, but that choice must appear to be reasonable to the hearer.

In determining the extent to which a decision-making body is faced with a situation of significant choice or one that resembles coercion, we can ask several questions:

1. Does the process of argumentation surrounding the decision to be made appear to give the group the freedom to reasonably say no? If a proposal is brought before the Faculty Senate, for example, does the group have the right to say no to the decision if, having examined the arguments, the decision is not seen as something that serves the best interests of the university? In theory, Faculty Senate has both the right and the obligation to make decisions that benefit the university; in practice, Senate members have not always felt that they could exercise that right. How arguments are made and responded to at a particular time creates a climate for faculty governance; that climate in turn will affect the nature of arguments that are made in the future.

2. What is the relationship between those presenting arguments in favor of one decision

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[12] Sally Miller Gearhart, "The Womanization of Rhetoric," *Women's Studies International Quarterly* 2 (1979), 195-201.

[13] Thomas R. Nielsen, *Ethics of Speech Communication*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1974).

over another and those making the decision? How does that relationship guide audience choices? Colleagues who argue with one another across the table at a Senate meeting probably interpret that issue and the arguments surrounding it differently than when arguments are presented by deans or other administrators who have the power to affect a senator's working environment. The perception of choice may not be as clear when arguments in favor of a particular decision are presented by those who hold more organizational power than the senators who will vote on the issue.

3. To what extent are the decision-makers aware of the persuasive techniques being used by those making arguments in favor of or against a decision? To be an academician is to be trained in the making and interpretation of arguments. Members of the Faculty Senate are probably more aware of argument techniques and the use of 'evidence' than members of decision-making bodies elsewhere.

4. To what extent do those making arguments in favor of or opposed to decisions urge that some sort of action must be taken now? Is there an urgency to the message? People who feel pressured to make a decision are more likely to feel as though they have been coerced.

The perception of choice is a key factor when people reflect on a process and determine whether they responded to 'persuasion' or to 'coercion.' To the extent that a process seemed coercive, they are likely to come to the conclusion that the process was unethical or those intimately involved with it were.

DO THOSE ADVOCATING A POSITION PRESENT INFORMATION FAIRLY?

The idea that information must be presented in a fair way is embedded in our democratically-based political system, from which we derive assumptions concerning governance processes. Wallace identified four fundamental values that underlie our political system: (1) respect for the dignity and worth of individuals; (2) rights of freedom of action, restrained by law; (3) faith in the equality of opportunity; (4) faith that every person is capable of understanding the nature of democracy and the necessity of freedom of the press, speech,

and assembly.[14] From these democratic values, Wallace identified four habits that should guide the a person in a persuasive situation (or, as applied here, in a decision-making situation):[15]

1. The *habit of search*. The communicator should have sought out all the possible facts about a topic prior to communicating about it.

2. The *habit of justice*. Facts and opinions should be selected and presented fairly, so that the audience is capable of making a fair judgment about the topic.

3. A *preference for public over private motivations*. The communicator should be able to make known his or her motives for communicating. Hidden motives should be considered suspect.

4. A *habit of respect* for dissent, to seek cooperation and compromise where possible, but not by sacrificing principle to it. A touchstone of this fourth habit is the ability to admit the force of opposing evidence and still advocate a position that represents one's own convictions.

Unlike Wallace, Day focuses not so much on the values that arise from a democratic system as the process within it. The ultimate democratic value is a procedural one: respect for the confrontation of opposing ideas and beliefs. Day claims that the primary ethical standard for judging public communication is whether opposing ideas, opinions, facts, and so forth are brought together in an open confrontation to make decisions.[16]

Overall, the ethical dilemma associated with the fair presentation of information focuses on whether there has been a search for all relevant information, fair presentation of all viewpoints associated with the topic, open confrontation of opposing viewpoints, and motives that are revealed rather than concealed. Clearly, whether or not information is seen as "fairly" presented depends both on its presentation and on the way it is heard. Members of the Workload and Compensation Council, for example, working on the assumption that the university has a predictable salary scale and method of determining that scale, might think themselves well within their rights to request a salary increase which the administration thinks is

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[14] Karl Wallace, "An Ethical Basis of Communication," *Speech Teacher* 4 (1955): 5.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Dennis G. Day, "The Ethics of Democratic Debate," *Central States Speech Journal* 17 (1966): 5-14.

outrageous. When administrative and faculty views of the budget are incommensurate, the need to engage in dialogue rather than monologue becomes particularly acute.

DO THOSE ADVOCATING THE POSITION APPEAL TO GOOD REASONS?

When the reasons on both sides seem equally good, how are senators to judge which course they should ultimately take? Fisher addresses this issue in his "Toward a Logic of Good Reasons."[17] The flaw in most analyses, he claims, is that evaluative systems are essentially circular. People think a reason for action is good because it is tied to some value, and the value is good because it is tied to a reason. It is possible, Fisher argues, to compare the values in different sides of the same issue to judge which is more compelling. The process takes place in five steps, which can be followed by answering the following questions:

1. What implicit and explicit values are embedded in the message? For example, the Faculty Senate recently passed a new set of promotion criteria. Most of the deliberation over the document revolved around qualifications for the rank of professor. Those opposed to the new criteria felt that imposing particular requirements for the number of years of college teaching, and the number of years an applicant must wait after receiving the doctorate, created artificial barriers to promotion and did not ensure that the applicant would be any more qualified than s/he would have been without the time constraints. Those in favor of the criteria argued that time constraints served as a reminder that establishing a record of significant scholarship took time and was unlikely to occur while a person was working on finishing a degree. Other arguments made against the promotion criteria included the charge that such criteria might discriminate against minorities and women; in response, the argument was made that lowering requirements so that minorities and women could advance was demeaning. Different values can be derived from the discourse: the value of development over time, the value of equal access, etc.

2. Are those values relevant to the nature of the decision that has to be made? One argument made against the promotion criteria was that it was unfair to suddenly expect

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[17] Walter R. Fisher, "Toward a Logic of Good Reasons," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 64 (1978): 376-384.

people who had been hired in under one set of expectations to suddenly be required to adhere to more demanding ones; it was countered with the argument that life is often unfair and we must live with that knowledge. Those arguing for fairness claimed that the counterargument was irrelevant.

3. What are the consequences of adhering to the values the persuader (or the persuadee) has used? How would adhering to those values change our notions of ourselves, our behavior, our relationships with others, or our place in society? We can ask what the consequences of adhering to the primary values behind each side in the promotion criteria debate might be. Those in favor of the new criteria claimed that the outcome would be better performances and more accountability for professors at the university; those opposed claimed that such criteria placed an undue burden on professors. The consequences of adhering too strongly to either position are burnout at one extreme and poor work habits at the other.

4. In addition to the consequences of the values, we look for their consistency: Are these values consistent with the way we think and with the way the people around us think? To be excellent in one's work is a value accepted by most at the university, but the university community is also committed to the balancing of one's professional life with one's spiritual and personal lives. Both sides advanced arguments based on values consistent with communal beliefs.

5. Even if a sound case has been established for some action, do the values linked to the reasons for action constitute an ideal basis for human conduct? Do the values transcend the immediate situation, or are they applicable only in this context? In the case of the promotion criteria, one could argue that the value of excellence transcended the value of balance, or perhaps subsumed the value of balance, and so constitutes an ideal basis for conduct.

The assessment of "good reasons," as with the perception of choice and the fair presentation of information, depends upon the way in which the Faculty Senate uses the values implied by past decisions to impact current decision making and guide future decisions. "Good reasons" may change over time and with the composition of the senate.

DO THE REASONS VIOLATE OR ENHANCE OUR HUMANITY?

Some writers characterize ethical communication as that which enhances and promotes uniquely human characteristics; unethical communication is that which dehumanizes its audience. Various aspects of human nature have been considered, among them the human capacity for reason and rationality, our use of language, and our need to come together in community.

Wiemann and Walter argue that there are two peculiarly human traits: (1) the need to symbolize—"the human being will live, fight, and even die for symbols he believes represent supremely important realities"; and (2) the need to relate to others and receive appreciative understanding. They describe ethical rhetoric (or, for our purposes, decision-making deliberations) as "the discovery of the means of symbolism that lead to the greatest mutual understanding and mutual control."[18] Wiemann and Walter conclude:

> If this analysis of the unique possibilities of the human being and their significance is correct, it follows that an ethical act is one that enables the organism to meet its constitutive need for symbolism and appreciative understanding; an unethical act is one that destroys, prevents, delays, or otherwise limits the possibilities of meeting these needs. The moral law derived from this ethic might be stated thus: Always act to provide conditions most favorable for appreciative understanding between yourself and all concerned.[19]

Two "checkpoints" may help us to recognize whether the way in which the senate makes and responds to persuasive messages enhances a sense of humanity: the responsibility assumed for the consequences of the persuasive messages, the motivations we bring into a persuasion situation, and the choice of appropriate messages.

Responsibility for Consequences

In considering the ethics of persuasive messages and people acting in persuasion

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[18] Henry N. Weimann and Otis M. Walter, "Toward an Analysis of Ethics for Rhetoric," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 43 (1957), p. 270.
[19] Ibid., p. 269. (Italics omitted).

situations, the focus for the most part has been on the initiator of communication. Yet, other people involved in the persuasion situation have an equal responsibility to foster an ethical climate. If group members do not demand ethical arguments, will they get them? Several authors think not. Diggs, for example, claims that a person who persuades is not the only one who can be blamed for the effects of a persuasive situation.[20] People who are gullible or who have too open a mind are also at fault. Zeuschner argues that listeners have an ethical responsibility to be receptive, to withhold quick evaluation of ideas and speakers, to give ideas a fair hearing, and to allow other listeners to do the same.[21] Johannesen maintains that the audience in persuasive situations has two responsibilities: reasoned skepticism and appropriate feedback.[22]

Of all the guidelines suggested for sharing responsibility in the persuasive situation, perhaps Andersen's 200 percent responsibility theory is the best.[23] Andersen argues that a person (or group) always chooses to be persuaded and hence is responsible for that decision. Those making persuasive arguments are responsible for their choices of techniques. If both parties assume total responsibility for their actions, we have 200 percent responsibility, and no one in the situation can blame the other for the choices he or she makes.

Motivation in Persuasion Situations

Bostrom maintains that "a simple standard against which to test the ethicality of persuasive acts is that of altruism. A persuader who sincerely has the best interests of the receivers in mind cannot be totally at fault."[24] Sproule argues along these same lines in claiming that unethical persuasion occurs when the initiator of the persuasion attempt acts selfishly and is unconcerned about the truth of the subject.[25]

Guidelines generated from the dialogical perspective are most important from the

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[20] B. J. Diggs, "Persuasion and Ethics," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 50 (1964): 360-369.
[21] R. B. Zeuschner, *Building Clear Communication* (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1985).
[22] Richard L. Johannesen, "Perspective on Ethics in Persuasion," in Charles U. Larson, *Persuasion: Reception and Responsibility* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1986): 311-338.
[23] Kenneth Anderson, *Persuasion: Theory and Practice* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1971).
[24] Robert Bostrom, *Persuasion* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1983).
[25] J. Michael Sproule, *Argument: Language and Its Influence* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1980).

standpoint of motivations of the participants in a persuasion situation. Perhaps it is unrealistic to expect that people will approach each other in a genuinely caring manner that affirms the other. Nilsen doesn't think so:

> I can choose whether I will consider the other's self-determining choice more important than his acceptance of mine; I can choose whether I will turn to the other and seek to meet him; to perceive him in his wholeness and uniqueness; I can choose whether I will value him as a person above all else. I can choose to try to relate to him as honestly as I can rather than put on a front so that he cannot relate to me.[26]

Overall, our motives should be tempered with a concern for the other as well as our own goals, and our goals should have some social utility beyond the immediate gains that will accrue to us. Keller and Brown go so far as to argue that the attitude of the speaker and listener toward one another is a more valid index of ethicality than the use of rational appeals or a commitment to "truth."[27] Certainly, at the very least we should be willing to make our motives in the situation known to the other.

CONCLUSION

Were I to take the position of some social constructionists, I would not write a conclusion to this paper, but would allow readers to create their own. But the conventions of paper writing, and the necessity to model "good scholarship" for my students, demands that I draw together the various threads I have cast and make at least one pattern among them.

It is not an easy task to study ethics from the standpoint of social constructionism. It is much easier to simply ask, "How do groups of people construct and reconstruct ethics as they interact?" Taking the viewpoint of the theorist requires the suspension of one's own judgment, the willingness to enter into a field of argument which one may not thoroughly understand or

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[26] Thomas Nilsen, "Dialogue and Group Process," paper presented at the annual meeting of the Speech Association of America, 1969.

[27] P. W. Keller and C. T. Brown, "An Interpersonal Ethic for Persuasion," *Journal of Communication* 18 (1968): 73-81.

appreciate, and a willingness to ask questions when it is known that the answers found may change one's way of thinking. Taking such a challenge, however, allows us to see the world in process, rather than as a static entity. It allows us to understand that action and meaning, and even ethics, are products of interaction rather than simply precursors to it. The perspective of social constructionism runs the risk of being morally vapid, but it is not impossible to find transcendent values for particular forms of communication, such as decision-making, that can help us to understand communication processes within them.